



1888 Anti-Chinese Riots in Brisbane Chinatown

Queensland History Week
23 - 27 May 2022



QUEENSLAND HISTORY WEEK

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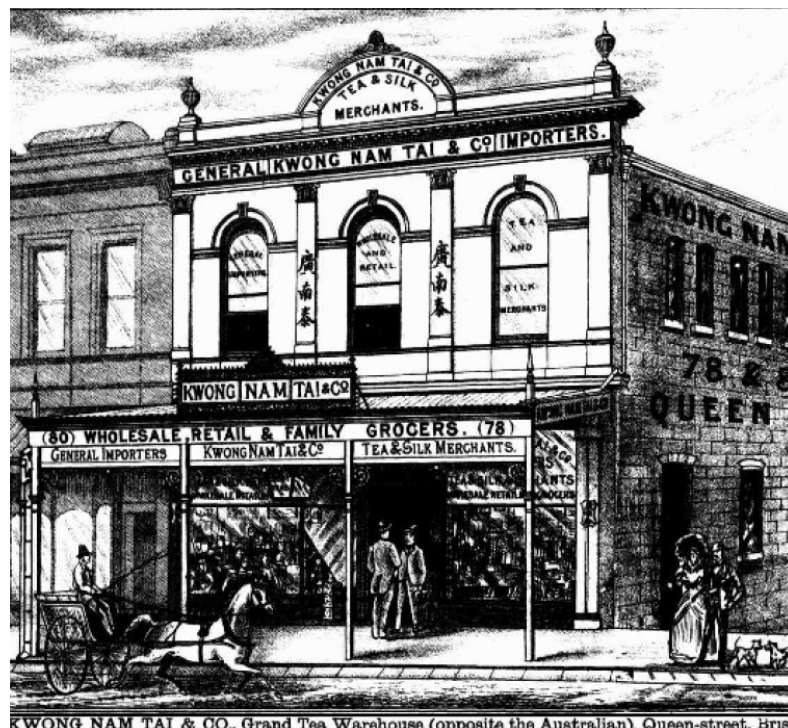
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Above:

Image: Albert Street, Brisbane, ca. 1883. (1883). State Library of Queensland.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10462/deriv/140734>.

Right:

Image: Kwong Nam Tai & Co. (1888, January 14). *Queensland Figaro and Punch*, 12.
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/84108291?searchTerm=kwong%20nam%20tai>.



Stories of Queensland - 1888 Anti-Chinese Riots in Brisbane Chinatown

The first Chinese came to the Queensland goldfields around the 1840s. Initially, the Chinese were welcomed as cheap labour. But their competitiveness and their outnumbering of Europeans at a proportion of about 6 to 1 led to escalating tensions. According to historian Ray Evans, the first anti-Chinese riot in Queensland was against Chinese labourers near Ipswich in 1851.[1] In Brisbane, Chinese businesses were established in Fortitude Valley, and Albert, Adelaide and Roma Streets (the first 'Chinatowns' in Brisbane). Chinese merchants operated as 'post office, a shipping agent and an employment bureau' for Chinese labourers.[2] The Queensland press depicted Chinese premises as dens of crime, sinful vices and disease (even though the European establishments did not necessarily have better conditions). The Queensland Figaro published lurid cartoons such as of Brisbane in the future being rampaged by Chinese.[3]

It is May 5, 1888, polling day of the North Brisbane general election. Both candidates, Premier Sir Samuel Griffith and Sir Thomas McIlwraith, and their supporters appeal to voters through explicit anti-Chinese messages. By the early afternoon, thousands have gathered around polling booths in Adelaide Street, fueled by alcohol. Fights break out. An unruly mob pursues Griffith when he leaves the polling booth at about 4:30pm. At around 7:30pm, McIlwraith, the clear winner, addresses crowds from a balcony in Albert Street then leaves. It is now almost 8pm. A fight breaks out in a nearby Chinese store when a young white man refuses to pay for goods. The crowd turns on one of the storekeepers, Ding Chee, and stones are thrown through the store's windows.[4] The mob proceeds up and down Albert Street, yelling racist comments about Chinese while hurling stones and metal through Chinese stores. The mob swells to 1,000-2,000 people, 'smashing windows and pillaging shops, homes and boarding houses occupied by Chinese' in Mary, Elizabeth, Queen (including prominent store Kwong Nam Tai), Roma and Wickham Streets. Inside, Chinese cower in fear.[5] The crowd is finally dispersed by police by midnight. Police arrest only one man (later found not guilty of malicious damage to property), as they claimed most people involved were 'respectable citizens'. [6] The Chinese businesses would be given no compensation.[7]

References

[1] Raymond Evans, 'Chinese Settlers and Sojourners', Multicultural Research Library, accessed 28 May, 2018, <http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/library/media/Video/id/820.Chinese-settlers-and-sojourners>.

[2] Joan Fisher, 'The Brisbane Overseas Chinese Community 1860s to 1970s: Enigma or Conformity', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2005, <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:189802>, p. 117.

[3] Raymond Evans, 'Night of Broken Glass: The Anatomy of an Anti-Chinese Riot', *Fighting Words: Writing About Race*. 1999. University of Queensland Press, pp. 80-82, 85.

[4] Ibid., p. 86, 88.

[5] Raymond Evans, 'Anti-Chinese Riot: Lower Albert Street', Multicultural Research Library, accessed 28 May, 2018, <http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/library/media/Document/id/860.Anti-Chinese-riot-in-Brisbane-1888>

[6] Evans, 'Night of Broken Glass', p. 90.

[7] 'Chinese Merchants and Brisbane Money-Lenders', *Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette*, 24 September 1889, p. 3.

Thinking Activity

- Connect – how does this story connect to what you already knew about the history of the Chinese in Queensland?
- Extend – what new ideas/information broaden your thinking about the history of the Chinese in Queensland or extend it in different directions?
- Challenge – what challenges or puzzles you about this event in Queensland's history?

Extra for experts

- Notice – read one of: *The Telegraph (Brisbane)*, 7 May 1888; *The Queanbeyan Age*, 16 May 1888; *The Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette*, 24 September 1889. What are your first impressions of how the riots have been reported? Use 2 different coloured highlighters to compare how the article describes (characterises) the rioters versus the Chinese.
- Perspective Taking – summarise the article's perspective (viewpoint) on the riots.
- Same and Different – as a class: how are the articles similar and/or different in how they have reported the riots? Note the context and origin of each article. What conclusions can we draw about links between language and racism?